THE LONDON OBSERVER
6 October 1967

The spy we took in from the cold

by MAUREEN McCONVILLE

SHORTLY before Edward Heath revealed in the House of Commons on 1 July 1963 that H. A. R. ('Kim') Philby had indeed worked for the Russians, *The Observer* got a telephone call from the Foreign Office. This call, which warned the Editor of what was about to happen, was a sequel to the Foreign Office's suggestion, seven years earlier, that *The Observer* might find work for Philby after his years of makeshift jobs in the cold.

That day, in the summer of 1963, they admitted that the man they had 'sold' to *The Observer* had turned out to be a Soviet agent after all. They also hinted that their 1956 promise that Philby would never again work for them had been broken.

But matters of such moment cannot be dispatched with a telephone call. Donald Tyerman, Editor of *The Economist*, and David Astor, Editor of *The Observer*—Philby's joint employers over the previous six and a quarter years—met Edward Heath (then Minister of State at the Foreign Office) in the House of Commons.

'While we waited to see Heath,' David Astor says, 'an official went in before us. I presume he was from the MI side and was briefing Heath. At the interview, Heath was obviously still fairly ignorant about it all. I got the impression that he knew extremely little about the whole matter. He said he wasn't yet sure whether Philby had gone behind the Iron Curtain or not.

'I told him that I had employed Philby at the Foreign Office's suggestion, and only on the understanding that he would never be connected with Intelligence again.

'The Foreign Office was responsible for recommending to me a Russian spy. It was also responsible for its silence to *The Observer* when Philby was taken back on the books of British Intelligence. Heath accepted these responsibilities.'

This interview was the last chapter in a drama in which *The Observer* was made the pawn of rival Intelligence Services. The drama began in 1956, but some months before that there was an ironic prelude.

When, in September 1955, the Government published a White Paper on Burgess and Maclean's defection, *The Observer* commissioned the late Alexander Foote, a renowned former Soviet agent, to write on it. Foote wrote an article saying that it was so unusual for the Russians to rescue their agents that in this case there must have been an overriding reason for it: it must have been done to shield somebody much more important. Within a year, that somebody much more important was on *The Observer's* payroll.

For a successful spy, two factors are essential: cover and access. Over the last lap of Philby's 30 years' work for Russia, his cover, as Middle East correspondent for *The Observer* and *The Economist*, was impeccable. This was because he worked quite as hard at his overt job as at either of his covert ones, for British and for Soviet Intelligence.

Among all the people on both papers who had dealings with him as a journalist, there is total unanimity of judgment: he was a first-class correspondent, well informed, objective, competent and conscientious.

This was the judgment at the time. But before Harold Macmillan cleared his name in the House of Commons in November 1955, Philby, with his reputation tarnished from his undefined complicity in the Burgess and Maclean affair, had found it hard to get back into journalism.

On the suggestion of Malcolm Muggeridge, he first angled for a job with *The Observer* in February 1952. His application was coupled with a strong recommendation from the Foreign Editor of *The Times*, who had known and admired his coverage of the Spanish Civil War. But there was no vacancy.

However, a connection had been made, and when Philby found himself in Spain in June 1952, he briefly represented *The Observer* there. It was he who ended the arrangement: 'I have been offered a commercial opening of a nature so attractive that I cannot refuse it,' he wrote. 'I do not suppose that this news is likely to cause much dismay in the office of *The Observer*. There is quite a lot of interesting material here, but it is much more suited to the magazine world than to a weekly newspaper in these days of newsprint shortage.'

'Kim was a man with a way of sinking into the background,' says a former colleague. From *The Observer's* point of view, he sank out of sight between that letter of June 1952 and October 1955, when first the American Press, then Marcus Lipton, accused him of being the 'third man.'

Macmillan's clearance rescued him from his twilight existence. Again he attempted to get a job in journalism. But this time there was a difference. Not only was he 'clear,' officialdom was also working on his behalf.

In the spring of 1956 the Foreign Office made an official approach to the Editor of *The Observer*. 'It was put to me on a purely charitable basis,' David Astor says. 'They were worried about him and felt that he had been unfairly treated. He had children. He had no way of earning a living. He had been a journalist in pre-war days. Could I give him a job?'

When they made this request, the Foreign Office declared that Philby was no longer employed by them and solemnly undertook never to use him again.

The Observer had cogent reasons for refusing to consider Philby. In the aftermath of Burgess and Maclean's disappearance, the paper published an article condemning the hounding of Melinda Maclean and her children by the British Press, in particular by the *Daily Express*. For this it had been strongly attacked. It was accused of shielding Soviet sympathisers. Could it afford to employ a man who had been involved, however peripherally, in the scandal?

The Observer's Managing Editor, Kenneth Obank, opposed hiring Philby. He had never been happy with the paper's line against the *Express*, and he thought this would put *The Observer* in an absurd position, which could damage it. 'You're going too far,' he told the Editor.

'I said the fact that nobody would touch Philby in spite of his clearance was unjust, and we ought to help him,' the Editor says.

So it was decided, in principle, to take him on. Meanwhile other, but private, approaches had been made for Philby to *The Economist*. In April 1956, a journalist on a London weekly suggested his name to John Midgley, then Foreign Editor. Midgley was surprised at the indirect approach because he had known Philby at Cambridge. He arranged to see him.

Philby proposed going to the Middle East, if he were given sufficient prospects of income from British newspapers. He had a basic resource there, in his father, H. St J. Philby.

It suited *The Observer* and *The Economist* to have him there. In 1956, the year of Suez, the Middle

Continued

East was flaring into prominence as as a centre of news. John Midgley checked with the senior official in the Foreign Office's news department that there was no objection to Philby's working for *The Economist*, and the two papers then negotiated his terms of payment. He was to get a retainer of £500 a year, *The Observer* paying £300, *The Economist* £200, plus expenses and payment for news and articles sent. Later the retainer was increased to £1,000.

During the negotiations—in June and July 1956—Philby came to see the Editor of *The Observer*. Exact contemporaries, they had met before, but their acquaintance was minimal. In view of the risk of public abuse which David Astor was running in taking Philby on, he expected some sign of a personal reaction.

'I imagined he would say something like "Nice of you to do it." To my slight surprise he said no such thing: was catlike in his withdrawnness; wanted to get straight down to business. I thought he was a very odd fish indeed. Remote, untidy, as if nothing was disturbing his existence; no friendly gesture. But this was the only suspicious thing about him.'

By the beginning of September, Philby was in Beirut, having left his wife, Aileen, and five children in England. His first piece for *The Observer* appeared in the issue of 16 September. It forecast an Arab League reassessment of the situation in the Suez crisis. In *The Observer* office in London it posed a problem: should it carry his name and possibly provoke an outcry from the *Express*? 'I thought it was useless to try to conceal him. We put his name on it, and waited for the ceiling to fall; it never did,' the Editor says.

The first years of Philby's employment covered a critical period of Middle East affairs. After the Suez crisis, there was in 1957 the Russian-American conflict over Syria, the Syrian-Egyptian union, the Lebanese Civil War and the Iraqi revolution of 1958. The Arab-Israeli confrontation and the Western obsession with Communist plans in the Middle East were the background to local alarms and excitements.

His sphere of operations was basically the Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Iraq. Occasionally he would visit Saudi Arabia for his own purposes. He rarely went to Egypt. As a part-time correspondent, on a retainer, he was not mobile enough to cover the Middle East single-handed, and staff men were constantly sent out to cover special jobs. To some extent, Philby was an anchor man.

In this role he gave good service. 'He was a very balanced, able correspondent,' says Robert Stephens, now Diplomatic Correspondent of *The Observer*, who had preceded Philby in the Middle East. 'He was not very adventurous: he didn't like to stir too much. He wrote judiciously and was well-informed. He showed what he was: a good journalist who had also had some diplomatic training.'

Although Philby showed sympathy for the nationalist movements in the Middle East, his writing did not suggest ideological commitment. On the whole, his stories did not differ from the main trend of liberal, well-informed reporting from the Middle East. Once, however, *The Observer* took him to task for a failure in objectivity. 'I detect in your pieces,' Michael Davie, then News Editor, wrote to him in 1958, 'an increasing tendency to introduce, either directly or covertly, your own private opinions. You will no doubt have observed that we have been excising these expressions of view.'

In the nature of things he had frequently to write about Communist aims and progress in Arab affairs, and on this topic, as on others, he provided a sober, balanced analysis. There was one occasion when he possibly betrayed special knowledge not available to all newspapermen: in an article in April 1957, for *The Observer Foreign News Service*, he said the Soviet Embassy in Syria had persuaded two Communist by-election candidates to withdraw in favour of more generally acceptable left-wing candidates. Ironically, Syria, apparently a Russian bastion in the Middle East, subsequently blacklisted Philby.

Fred Tomlinson, News Editor of *The Observer* when Philby joined the paper, says of him: 'Kim was the answer to a news editor's prayer. His copy was always beautifully clean and readable, very easy to sub. It always arrived on time. He never once, so far as I remember, failed to answer a cable.'

Philby would sometimes ask if he could use the pen name Charles Garner. He became Charles Garner for a visit he made to Saudi Arabia, where his father was closely linked with the Court. Ronald Harker, Editor of *The Observer Foreign News Service*, says: 'We though that Philby may have felt that traditional Middle Eastern courtesy would prevent him from giving an honest and critical appraisal of events under his own name, or else that his chances of being able to visit Saudi Arabia on future occasions would be prejudiced.'

In October 1956 Philby had described Saudi Arabia as 'that sink of bribery and corruption.'

Harker once cabled a request for a colour piece on King Saud's exotic private life, as light relief in the OFNS's heavy political tidings. Philby cabled back: 'You ask me hard things stop will do but request material be attributed unfortunate Charles Garner.'

When Philby first went out to Beirut, he was not easy to contact. The only address he supplied the office with was the Hotel Normandy. No one knew exactly what his private address was. He was a heavy drinker, tending to soak, in solitary gloom, in the hotel bar. He cared nothing for his personal appearance.

'I remember meeting him later, by accident, in the office corridor on one of his visits home,' says Obank. 'He looked scruffy. His jacket didn't match his trousers, his shirt collar was undone. I wasn't sure whether he was too shy to speak or was just suffering from a home-leave hangover. I was conscience-stricken.

'As a matter of fact, his face has haunted me ever since. It was a pretty knocked-about face and his eyes were as baggy as his trousers, but I've never seen such a beautific expression outside a Renaissance painting.'

Philby's marriage to Eleanor in 1959 seemed to transform him, according to Robert Stephens. 'He had always been pleasant; now he looked happy. The beachcomberish existence was over. Now he had a very nice flat in the Rue Kantari, near the President's Palace. He was still drinking, but in a different way, a more jolly way.'

Not many of his colleagues knew Philby. On his trips to London, he was not seen around Fleet Street, the pubs, the Press Club. He did not loiter in the office.

'He avoided any sort of personal relationship with me,' says the Editor. 'When he came home from the Middle East he didn't ask to see me, as is usual for returning foreign correspondents. There were occasions when he returned and I didn't even realise he was back here.'

Those who did know him liked him. They found him diffident, and his diffidence was reinforced by his stammer. Once, through an accounting error, he was being underpaid. He did not raise the matter until the next time he was in England, when he observed, in his usual self-effacing manner: 'D-d-do you th-think I'm getting the right m-m-money?'

'My first impression, and my last, was that he was a man of extreme kindness,' Tomlinson says. 'One time when I was in Beirut, I happened to tell him I'd left some medicine at home. He at once got a cab and went to a chemist for a new supply. He suggested sacrificing his own job to a fellow journalist in the Middle East who had fallen on hard times.'

Modest in his manner and in his tastes (he was described as 'a spartan and careful spender'), completely without ostentation, charming and correct, Philby, the master spy, seemed to many people vulnerable, even endearing. An aspect of this side of his enigmatic character was his fondness for animals.

The last dispatch he sent Ronald Harker, for use in the Foreign News Service, told the story of his taming a young fox. 'I wrote back,' Harker says, 'and said I didn't feel I could use this in our general service, but it looked as if it would make an excellent feature for the Christmas number of *Country Life*, and could I be his agent? He cabled: "Do what you like".

'*Country Life* made a whole page out of it, and in due course I received the princely sum of £12. I sent this along to Philby. But it was never acknowledged.'

On 1 January 1963 *The Observer* accounts department wrote to Philby about an Aden expenses claim. 'Unfortunately your additions of sterling are incorrect, and should read £71 1s. not £76. This leaves a total balance owing to us of £59 8s. This will be deducted from your next payments.' The letter concluded: 'With best wishes for a Happy and Prosperous New Year.'

On 22 January the News Editor acknowledged Philby's request for home leave in the coming summer.

On 23 January Philby disappeared. It was known that he had been drinking a lot lately: at first the paper assumed the explanation must be personal. As the weeks went by the probability of a political explanation grew: *The Observer* sent out a senior man to make on-the-spot inquiries. The most probable explanation seemed that Philby had gone to the Yemen (where his father's name was legendary) to raise money for his retirement by some political service. [illegible] Office.

OCT 8 1967